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The Genesis of the Bowling Green Public Library
by Jonathan Jeffrey

Bowling Green's early intellectual development was stalled by its concentration on economic survival. Incorporated in 1812, Bowling Green, by mid-nineteenth century, emerged as the transportation and commercial center for Warren County and several contiguous counties. Flatboats laden with the produce of a fecund countryside left the Bowling Green area annually in the late spring to points southward. The Barren River was made navigable for steamboats by a series of locks and dams as early as 1842. Cargo and passenger boats departed from Bowling Green for Louisville and Evansville via the Barren, Green and Ohio Rivers. Upon the completion of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad in 1859, Bowling Green became even more accessible to the outside world. Built to cater to visitors, Bowling Green's variety of stores and hotel facilities made it an ideal stop on the railroad. As the city grew, the need for a community library increased, and several groups attempted to establish such a service.

Two early efforts to organize library service in Bowling Green can be documented, but little is known about either. Both organizations were established as subscription libraries, which were quite common throughout nineteenth century America. In these libraries, people purchased a share in the stock company in order to enjoy the organization's privileges which could include circulation of books, newspapers and magazines, as well as lectures and demonstrations. In 1838 the Kentucky General Assembly passed "An Act to Incorporate the Bowlinggreen [sic] Library Company." The act's introduction leads one to believe that the organization for this group was already in place: "Whereas, some of the citizens of Warren county have, by subscription of shares of stock of five dollars each, constituted themselves a company...have elected officers, purchased valuable books...and desire an act of incorporation for the effectuation of their laudable purposes." The act outlines the organization of a Board of Trustees and authorized them to "levy a contribution upon said stockholders, not to exceed one dollar upon each share in any one year, for the purpose of increasing the stock of books, or other literary appendages, of said Library." The legislation also noted that the Trustees could "receive a conveyance, by donation or purchase, of a lot of ground within or near said town, for the erection of a Library room, and contract for the building of the same."

(*Acts 1838 84*) No other evidence of this organization exists. It is possible that it was this group of “learned” men who formed the Bowling Green Lyceum in the early-1840s.

The second effort to organize a library in Bowling Green took place in 1878 when the General Assembly chartered the “Bowling Green Library Company.” This group’s incorporators included the city’s most prominent professional men. The legislation again outlined the method of leadership for the group. The capital stock was limited to \$100,000, and each share was limited to \$25 with no individual allowed more than five shares. The act contains a specific section outlining the company’s purpose:

The object of this association shall be to obtain and keep, for the use of its members and of others, upon such terms as may be prescribed in the constitution and by-laws, books, pamphlets, publications, engravings, pictures, works of art, maps, philosophical apparatus, or other things which the board of directors may direct; and it may employ lecturers, and cause courses of public lectures or other entertainments to be given.

Again little is known about this organization. No documentation or oral tradition documents if the library’s directors fulfilled so noble a purpose. (*Acts 1878 456*)

Soon after the Bowling Green Library Company was incorporated A.W. Mell decided to move his Southern Normal School (later Western Kentucky University) to Bowling Green from Glasgow. In 1884, Bowling Green citizens raised \$3,000 in subscriptions to lure Mell to their community and offered a downtown building to the school for classrooms at a reduced rate. The Normal’s library, a tiny room with a small number of volumes, was not a place for children, and undoubtedly townsfolk not associated with the academic community were uncomfortable there. When the college was moved to the old Potter College campus in 1911, the entire library filled only two wagons. (Harrison 36) Other prominent schools that developed in Bowling Green had similar libraries, particularly Potter College, which housed a fascinating collection specializing in the languages, ancient history and literature.

As Bowling Green grew, it revealed its reputation as the educational center for south central Kentucky, but it still had no library easily accessible to the public. Well-to-

do folks purchased books and popular periodicals in local bookstores or subscribed to the same and circulated these materials amongst friends. Near the beginning of the twentieth century, Bowling Green blossomed with intellectual pursuit. Literary clubs formed throughout the community, including the Ladies' Literary Club (1880), the Current Topic Club (1895), the XX Club (1901), the XV Club (1879), the Browning Club (1895) and a host of others. The Ladies' Literary Club began a library in 1891, which after 1895 was cosponsored with the Current Topic Club. This developed into a sizable collection of popular adult fiction and classical literature. In 1900 the 1400-volume "Woman's Library" collection was opened to the public for an annual fee of \$2.00. (Bolte 9) Within two years the joint library committee was appalled to find that nearly one-third of the books circulated were novels. They felt this trend was "having a very bad effect on the morals of this library...as the baser elements of its composition are being cultivated to the exclusion of the standard and classic virtues." When the new City Hall was completed in 1908, a room was dedicated for the library. Soon the women began to find the library's maintenance and operation "burdensome." In 1913 the library committee proposed donating the collection to Western Kentucky State Normal School, but the Current Topic Club opposed this plan. The library was eventually donated to the Bowling Green Board of Education, and the books were installed at Bowling Green High School with the stipulation that the women could retain access to the collection. (Niedermeier 11)

Bowling Green's lack of a public library was typical of the plight in many American communities, but during the Progressive Era—a period of social reform which began in the 1890s—a push for public libraries developed across the country. Many cities in the late nineteenth century received their libraries through the generosity of wealthy benefactors, in particular Andrew Carnegie. From 1886 to 1919, Carnegie's iron and steel fortune helped construct 1,412 libraries at a cost of almost 40 million dollars. This money was designated for construction only; communities had to pledge, through ordinance, to maintain the new edifice and build a book collection before receiving construction funds. (Sessa 2389)

By 1900, many of Bowling Green's citizens were aware of the need for a public library that would be accessible to all its people. Led by local club women, a group of citizens petitioned the City Council for support in applying for Carnegie funds. The

Carnegie Foundation required proof of future appropriations before releasing funds for construction. The Council supported the civic idea but eventually rejected it, fearing it would be unable to fund the project in the future. (Bolte 9)

Another defeat occurred when the City Council rejected the conversion of a private home into a public library. On May 20, 1904 one of Bowling Green's most cherished spinsters, Victoria Jackson, died. In her will she stipulated that her house at 1123 College Street be used as an orphanage. Many people believed Miss Jackson planned that her home be used as a library, but that was really her alternate plan. The will stated: "It is my purpose and desire to establish a Cumberland Presbyterian Orphans' Home for white children in Bowling Green, Kentucky...and to this end I vest...the title of the house...being the place I now reside." (*Cumberland* 1) Prior to her death, Miss Jackson had begun remodeling her home on College Street so it could be used as an orphanage. The orphanage closed in 1930 after twenty years of operation. Under the stipulations of the will, the city now had the opportunity to utilize the building for a public library. However, according to the will, a tax had to be approved which would provide for the house's maintenance. The City Council appointed a committee to study the proposition.

On September 1, 1930 the City Council rejected the offer on the grounds that a clear title to the property seemed unobtainable. The committee reported that conversion of the building into a library would cost the city between \$12,000 and \$15,000 and appropriate equipment and books would be an additional \$25,000. The city would also "be called upon for expenditure attending the operations and maintenance of the library." It was pointed out that Bowling Green citizens had access to the libraries at Bowling Green High School and Western. The local paper stated that "it was the opinion of a number of the Councilmen that there is no great demand for a municipally operated library." Miss Jackson's home was subsequently sold with the proceeds going to the Mission Boards of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. ("City Not" 1)

Although the idea of a public library for Bowling Green never faded completely, the Great Depression distracted people's attention. Providing for basic human needs took precedence over social amenities. Public works programs initiated by the Roosevelt administration did offer hope for services that had been dormant during the Depression's

hardest years. The library movement in Bowling Green benefited from one of these innovative initiatives. In the late 1930s, Bowling Green's fledgling chapter of the American Association for University Women (AAUW) spearheaded a new crusade to obtain a public library.

In 1937 a new branch of the AAUW was organized in Bowling Green. At their first meeting held on October 21, 1937, the club adopted several community projects. The first listed project was the "promotion of [a] county library movement." Five other projects were considered, but only the library venture proceeded. (AAUW Minutes October 1937)

Miss Margie Helm, head of the Western Kentucky State Teachers College (hereafter referred to as Western) library, and her committee approached the city's Mayor about petitioning the state Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters for funding to supply workers and books for a new library. The city would have to provide an appropriation that would cover rental of a suitable room for the library. The mayor concurred, and a petition was proffered to the proper officials.

In a July 13, 1938 letter to the Bowling Green paper, a prominent female citizen intimated that a public meeting would be held in the near future to discuss the potential for a public library. She applauded the "cultural mindedness" of Bowling Green citizens, but unabashedly reminded them that "she [Bowling Green] must shamefacedly admit she has no Public Library. Be it mystery, absurdity or paradox, it is a situation which we must admit 'just is.'" (Pushin 4) Within days city officials announced that the petition to the WPA for a "library service at Bowling Green" had been approved. The \$30,050 grant had been personally pushed by Kentucky Senator Alben W. Barkley. ("\$30,050 Grant" 1) Finally, it looked as if public library service in Bowling Green was a possibility. The AAUW and other interested citizens lost no time in making the library a reality.

By October 1938 a library had been set up in the clubroom of the Warren County Homemakers at the Helm Hotel in the downtown business district. This was sometimes referred to as the "Public Restroom," as women from the county could relax there while their husbands finished business in town. The first librarian, Nell Garrison, was paid with WPA funds. She announced a call for books, requesting "clean and wholesome literature" for children. The press release further stated: "There has never been in this city a library

for children below junior high school age. Even the elementary schools have only a few books in each classroom and these are quickly read and the children are as eager as ever for more mental food.” Although the emphasis was on children, the press release also requested “books for high school and adult years...because this library will service others beside[s] the children.” (AAUW Press Release March 1939)

Still, in a sense this was not a public library. True, it was open to people of all ages, but the local municipality was not shouldering responsibility for funding it through taxation. The above press release acknowledged this situation: “It is hoped that this library will grow and become a part of a county public library.” This sentiment was reiterated by Mary Marks, president of the AAUW, at the March 1939 meeting when she said “the purpose of the local branch is to help create a demand for a library.” (AAUW Minutes March 1939) Those involved were pleased with the government subsidy, but they realized it was not a permanent arrangement.

Shortly before the opening of the WPA Library, a large public meeting was held in the interest of fostering support for the construction of a combined library and community center building for Bowling Green. Representatives from twenty clubs and organizations attended. Preliminary plans for a building that would contain library facilities, an auditorium for public meetings, and smaller meeting rooms for clubs, were presented at the rally. A committee was elected to determine a proper location and obtain cost estimates for the project. The recent construction of a similar building in Franklin, Kentucky, the Goodnight Library and Auditorium, had fomented this movement. The committee presented their proposal to the City Council and once again the Council did not feel it could guarantee the future costs of maintaining such a facility. (Bolte 10)

Meanwhile, the AAUW and other interested parties were drumming up support for the fledging library. In a letter read at the April 1939 AAUW meeting, Mayor Callis stated that the WPA librarian would be withdrawn from the project if more interest was not shown. (AAUW Minutes April 1939) Margie Helm countered with a plan which requested cooperation of all the civic clubs in the community in providing books and magazines for the library especially for children and to build awareness of the services that the library offered. The campaign was successful and attracted a large number of new patrons to the facility.

After several location changes, the library eventually moved, in 1941, to new and more spacious quarters in the Bowling Green Armory, located two blocks from the city's town square. The library occupied two large rooms: a reading room and a workroom. Despite these improvements, Miss Helm pointed out in a newspaper article, the library was not tax supported. She still considered the move a strategic "milestone...in the effort to establish a public library for the town and county." ("WPA Public Library" 2) The plan, as outlined by Miss Helm in this letter, was to have a central library in Bowling Green with branch libraries in other towns and a "book truck" to deliver books to people in the county. In 1941 bookmobiles were relatively new ideas in Kentucky, displaying not only Miss Helm's vision but her awareness of cutting edge practices in library services.

Then on July 1, 1942, the WPA referral agent was withdrawn from Bowling Green. Concurrently funds for the library's administration were withdrawn. Would Bowling Green revert back to no library service? In July, a local theatre manager donated the necessary \$30 to keep the library open, but in August a decision had to be made. Editorials and letters to the paper implored city/county officials to not let the library's efforts wither. Letters from Paul Garrett, president of Western, and Mary Moore, librarian at the Kentucky Library, reiterated the point that Western's library was not a public library. Moore explained that that college library "is financed by the state, but the funds are appropriated to serve the college—not to serve as a public library." (Garrett & Moore 4) Miss Helm had graciously allowed the public to use the college's library, but its chief audience was its students. These letters were important, as they began to inform the public that a public library was necessary, especially for children.

Fortunately, the city shouldered its new responsibility, appropriating \$50 a month for the library. Mayor Gaston W. Cole also appointed five women to serve as a Board of Trustees. ("Library Board" 5) Now the city had a "real" public library which opened its collections and facilities to all without distinction and was supported by local money. The exception to this—and it was a big exception—was the fact that blacks were not allowed to use the library. In 1944, a local hosteler, C.W. Lampkin, offered to build a library as a lasting memorial to his wife, but this project never developed. Although recorded in the

library Board's minutes, neither the details of Lampkin's offer nor his reasons for abandoning the project are mentioned.

The period the library spent in the Armory, from April 1941 to December 1946, was fruitful. In June 1946 the library boasted a 9,000-volume collection, a new Boys and Girls Room, a branch library for "colored people", an increased budget, good publicity, and new extension libraries. The Boys and Girls Room was quite an innovation. At the time, it was reported that only three other libraries in the state had similar rooms specifically dedicated to children's literature. In May 1946 it contained 2,645 volumes with an annual circulation of 12,740 books and 950 enrolled borrowers. The "Branch Library" at 322 Chestnut Street for "colored" patrons contained approximately 3,000 volumes and had 347 registered users. (Morningstar 7) This "separate but equal" status was maintained until the mid-1950s.

Gradually the city raised its appropriations for library services. When Mayor Cole appointed a Library Board of Trustees, the Kentucky Library Extension Service officially recognized the library as a "public library." Increases in city appropriations brought corresponding increases in state aid, which usually took the form of new books. New books from the state Library Extension Service allowed the library to loan traveling collections of fifty books each to St. Joseph's Parochial School and four county schools.

The library grew so rapidly that when its Board of Trustees heard that two additional rooms in the Armory might be available, Margie Helm immediately made a motion to rent them. By the end of 1945 the library had approximately 9,000 volumes with 1,000 awaiting cataloging. Much of the cataloging was being done by the cataloging classes in Western's library science program. However, shelving space for newly cataloged items was severely limited. The Board again demonstrated their responsibility when they voted in 1945 to take out a three-year \$3,000 insurance policy on the book collection and library furnishings.

As 1946 ended the Board of Trustees was justifiably proud of what had been accomplished, and the future looked promising. However, on December 31, 1946, the dream went up in flames. In the early morning hours, a fire spread from an adjoining building and destroyed the Armory. Losses were estimated at between \$250,000 and \$300,000. The fire destroyed 10,000 volumes—the entire collection minus the checked

out books. The only salvageable scrap from the devastation was a book flysheet, which featured a donation inscription to the library. The library's loss was estimated at \$13,835 and unfortunately the library only had \$3,000 worth of insurance coverage. Due to the lack of funds, insurance was considered a luxury. (Bolte 12)

From this seemingly desperate situation, a heroine—Ida Leighton Hodges—emerged. Hodges, a member of the library's Board, took the ashes and molded an effective public crusade to resurrect the library. Only hours after the fire, she told the local paper that, "efforts would be started immediately to obtain funds and books to replace the 10,000 volumes." ("Efforts" 1) She asked that all books checked out be returned immediately. A house across the street from the Armory, at 1014 Chestnut, was rented from Miss Hodges as the library's temporary quarters. She directed the staff to begin completing orders for new books. A fund for contributions was established, and Bowling Green citizens made generous donations to it. Miss Hodges's capable direction was essential to the project's success. The local paper said she was "busy plotting, planning and creating interest" in the new library.

Many of Bowling Green's civic, fraternal and literary clubs made donations. A college service organization at Western undertook a house-to-house canvas of the community in order to collect books and periodicals. On one Saturday, they collected 600 books and over 1,500 magazines. Once the word reached the library community via *Library Journal*, libraries nationwide sent scores of books. Libraries in Denver; Louisville; Racine, Wisconsin; Washington, D.C.; Kansas City, Missouri; Boston; and Nashville contributed materials. ("Bowling Green" 388) The city's school children donated \$58.62 to the library fund, and a group of soldiers at Fort Knox sent 87 books after hearing about the tragedy. Besides these corporate gifts, many individuals donated their time for work at the library including: lettering, pasting in pockets, accessioning and cataloging. By June 1947, the Library Board of Trustees reported \$1,950 in monetary contributions and that 7,951 books had been donated.

Rebuilding the library was truly a community effort. The local paper recorded accounts of how individuals helped the cause, including heart-warming stories about boys going door-to-door to collect books. When Miss Hodges stopped them and asked them who was donating the books, they replied, "Just a bunch of boys." After several more

days of collecting, the boys turned in 120 books. A polio victim, Barbara Kiel, donated 41 books to the library, as reading was her main diversion. (“Victim” 10) Children often walked into the library, handed Miss Hodges coins and asked her to buy them a new library.

The library Board asked Miss Hodges to approach hotelman C.W. Lampkin in regard to his previous offer to build a home for the library. This was fruitless, so on Saturday, February 23, 1947, less than two months after the fire, the library opened in its cramped headquarters at 1014 Chestnut. Approximately 3,000 books were available for circulation, with an additional 2,000 volumes awaiting cataloging and others still in boxes. The books were placed on shelves constructed from WWII ammunition boxes. The hours for the library were 1:00 to 5:30 Monday through Friday and all day on Saturday.

At the official opening, Miss Hodges stated that from the tragedy “has grown a deeper appreciation by the public of what this library meant to Bowling Green and Warren County.” (“New Library” 1) It appeared that Miss Hodges’s perception was correct. Few people could remember when the community had rallied so strongly behind a cause. The local paper editorialized:

What is the most valuable building in Bowling Green? As far as physical worth is concerned, we don’t know. But as far as its real worth to the community—its potential value to come—is concerned, the Bowling Green-Warren County Library, which occupies a more or less ramshackle house on Chestnut Street, is of inestimable value to the community. (“11 Books” 5)

The library’s phoenix-like rise was a great tribute to the community. Many hoped that the tremendous display of support would finally persuade the city and county governments that a public library was needed and wanted. Miss Frances Jane Porter, head of the Kentucky Library Extension Division, said she had never seen such public interest in a project as had been demonstrated in the local library.

By mid-1947, the library had stabilized in its new home, so the Board searched for new outreach possibilities. In October 1947, a bookmobile with a capacity of 800

books was offered to the library by the Kentucky Library Extension Service. The bookmobile was a converted WWII ambulance that had been purchased and outfitted by Mary Belknap Gray of Louisville. The Bowling Green Library Board of Trustees agreed to pay the minimum, \$150 portion of the expense of operating the truck. Maintenance and incidental costs were contributed by Mrs. Gray. (“Warren” 1) Margie Helm pointed out that this would be an ideal training ground for her library science students. In less than a month the bookmobile was in service, visiting five rural county communities. The Kentucky Parents and Teachers Association recognized the bookmobile’s contribution, calling it “so unique and so constructive in improving the standards of reading in the county.” They further suggested that interested individuals contact the Bowling Green library for further information. (“Bookmobile” 9)

On November 2, 1947 the “library branch for colored people” was moved. By this time, that collection was estimated at 3,500 volumes and was supervised by a “colored” librarian. It enjoyed a circulation of approximately 400 books a month. Its new location was only one block from the State Street School, Bowling Green’s segregated school for blacks. The new branch boasted a Boys and Girls Room and a weekly story hour. It provided “a means of recreation and education for the colored children that could otherwise not be obtained.” (“Formal” 9)

Although community support for the library was good, its financial situation was rather precarious. When Mayor Cole established the Library Board of Trustees in 1942, the Bowling Green Library became a legal entity. Two years later, the state legislature passed a library statute which provided that from five to fifteen cents of each \$100 of property assessed for taxation be used for libraries. Until 1947, the Bowling Green Library had carried out its programs without the funds this assessment could provide. The city was appropriating \$250 a month for the library’s operation. The tax assessment of five cents on every \$100 of property value would yield a conservative \$4,500 per year for the library, but the Board had never decided to press the issue.

In 1948 the City Council completely eliminated the public library in its budget. The great outpouring of affection for the library after the devastating fire should have demonstrated to the Council how the library was viewed by its constituents. After they had axed the library appropriation, the local newspaper warned the Councilmen:

“Stand to your posts, Mr. Councilmen! There’s stormy weather ahead. If you don’t know how much your constituents think of the public library, it is a safer wager that before many meetings pass all facts and figures will be presented. They will have the backing of an imposing list of resolutions pledging the support of a vast majority of those in Bowling Green’s civic life that are usually most concerned with the community’s welfare.” (“Breakers” 4)

The prophecy was quickly fulfilled, and the Mayor was inundated with letters and calls supporting the library.

Two days later, Mayor Henry J. Potter proffered his support of a \$4,500 appropriation. The chief issue, according to the Council, revolved around whether the appointment of the governing board by former Mayor Gaston W. Cole constituted legal establishment of the institution. Indeed it did, and the Board quickly assembled the records necessary to establish that fact although no city ordinance was found. The real issue, of course, was the money. The library Board was asking for a big jump—from \$3,000 to \$4,500—in their annual appropriation. The matter was temporarily tabled, and library supporters were told that “the matter would be worked out.” (“Mayor” 1)

A called City Council meeting was held on April 26, 1948 to discuss the library appropriation. By this time, the library had employed the services of a local attorney to assist them. One member of the city’s Board of Public Works seemed to demonstrate the prevailing attitude of the Council when he said: “I know hardly anything about it. Some of the Council did not know it was worth anything much and said we did not have the money for it. I don’t know how the public feels about it.” (“Council to Discuss” 1) The public was about to let them know.

The called meeting was attended by delegations from six units of Bowling Green’s Parent Teacher Association and from civic and patriotic organizations. In front of 150 citizens, the Council agreed to read the word “library” into the ordinance which set the new tax levy. However, the library would only receive funds from departments which had not depleted their appropriations. (“Fate” 1) The library was getting whatever money might be left over each year. By this action, the Council failed to heed all

arguments that the library had been legally established in 1942, entitling it to perpetual maintenance as required by state statute. The public's reaction was nothing short of fantastic. Dozens of supportive letters were sent to the local paper. Surely, the library Board was gratified by the public's response.

A committee was appointed to study the appropriation matter, and the local paper waxed eloquent in its support: "We cannot believe that it is the desire of the Council's constituents that the library appropriations be eliminated from the budget, nor can we believe that the administration desires such a course. Surely those in charge of this city's welfare can find some means of including a library appropriation in the budget." ("Conference" 3) On May 4 the Council voted to fund the complete \$4,500 for the library. They stipulated, however, "that there is intended that there be nothing in this ordinance whereby this Common Council admits the legal establishment of a City Library perpetual." ("Council Votes" 1) Although safe for one year, the future for the library was precarious.

Funding for the library remained unstable until the Bowling Green city government officially recognized the library as a city operated entity. The City Council passed an ordinance on October 2, 1953 which sanctioned "a free public library...to be known as the Bowling Green City Library." ("City Approves" 1) The Council's action in establishing a free public library placed the responsibility of maintaining the institution on the city's taxpayers. The Council also appointed a Board of Trustees. Although guaranteed a source of funding, the library changed little because of the new ordinance. There were no plans for a new building, and the "colored" branch remained on State Street. In a future article, the saga of constructing a permanent building dedicated to library services in Bowling Green will be discussed.

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